

Camera #36

I need to put this down in words. I can't explain what I've seen and when the Police come after me, as I know they will, I don't know what I will tell them. I know what I saw on Camera #36 that night. I haven't slept a wink. How could I? Maybe the telling will help set my thoughts straight.

I guess I should start at the beginning. I work at a security company. The business card says Surveillance Systems Specialist, which is a nice way of saying camera monkey. It's what the company does. We put in camera systems for businesses. Dome cameras, pan-tilt-zooms, the whole 9 yards. Just a little bit of knowledge about wiring, the proprietary software and we're good to go. At least it puts food on the table.

It was late in the day when I got the call from Tim. I work for a small company and we had to work pretty closely together but nobody really liked Tim. He was a small, sour middle aged man, unhappy with his lot in life. Always complaining about work. And tight fisted too. 5 dollar gift for a 20 dollar secret Santa exchange, never split the tip at a restaurant. That kind of guy.

"Hey, I got a two person job down at the building I'm working on. Just need to sign off that all the cameras are working. I know it's late but we can get it all done by today. Half an hour tops. The project director's already given me a blank time sheet. We'll split it fifty-fifty as three hours of work. Whatcha say?"

Tim's voice boomed from the phone, so loud that I had to hold it away from my ear. He sounded manically happy. Too happy. I'd never heard him say a single nice word to another human being in the whole of the 3 years I'd worked cameras. The offer was the clincher. The tight ass would never let another person share in a blank cheque like he just did, but the offer was just too good to pass up. I did the sums in my head. Greed won out. Money was tight and the extra cash would be enough for me to take my girl out for a nice dinner.

It was just past 6 when I got to the building he was talking about. It looked to be about ready, mostly furnishing and wiring work going on. At least the lights were in along with the AC. The parking lot out front was virtually empty. I found it odd that Tim would be working all by himself in the building. I guessed that most folks had headed home early for the weekend. The front glass doors weren't even locked. Really sloppy, security wise. I shook my head. My phone buzzed.

"Second floor, security room."

Totally cryptic. At least the elevators were working. The building was almost done. The overhead fluorescent lights were up and working. The floor had a thick coating of plaster dust from drilling holes in walls, little colourful plastic tubes stripped from wires, the odd screw or nail looking forlorn on the carpeted floor. The air was thick with the scent of dust, solder and fresh plastic.

The second floor was a hive of formless corridors. They hadn't gone for the open concept office. It took some wandering about before I got to the security office. The empty building was beginning to creep me out in a way I could not identify. The silence was oppressive, like a blanket weighing down on everything. Even my footsteps on the dusty carpet seemed muffled.

Tim wasn't in the control room. The room was silent apart from the whirling of the fans in the CPUs. I found a clipboard with a listing of all the cameras in the building, all 35 of them. A little light for a building like this. I guessed that's where Tim left off, verifying that all the cameras were working. I felt a flash of anger at Tim not even bothering to show up to tell me what needed to be done.

I paused. The laziness wasn't even characteristic of Tim. The guy might have been an asshole but he was nothing if not meticulous. The empty building was beginning to give me the creeps. I looked up at the screens. 6 screens, multiplexed with 6 cameras. Something didn't gel. I looked back at the clipboard. There was

one extra camera that wasn't accounted for.

I dialled Tim's cell phone. The flat beeps seemed to mock me from the speaker of my phone. I had a choice. To stay and finish up verifying the cameras or to cut my losses and leave. I figured that penning my signature to the clipboard would clock my hours in, whether or not Tim turned up. Greed won again.

I examined the view from each of the cameras, checking for range of motion, blind spots on the corridors and the like. I ticked each camera off checklist until I got to the last camera. Camera #36. It didn't respond like the rest. No motion controls, no zoom, nothing. I squinted at the view from the camera and the floor plans. The screen didn't help. It showed the same nondescript view of a corridor that could have been from any corner of the building. The camera took in the view down three separate corridors in a long, lazy sweep. A t-junction, I thought. That wasn't particularly helpful since I wasn't familiar with the building. The slowly panning camera that I could not control filled me with an unexplained dread. I was not surprised to find gooseflesh up and down my arms. Why wasn't Tim picking up the phone? Where the hell was he? My heart started racing. The walls felt like they were closing in on me in the tiny security room. The whole situation felt wrong.

Motion on Camera #36 caught my eye. It was strange; it looked like someone was turning off all the lights down the corridor in the centre of the T junction. This wasn't quite right. The camera had a low light mode, the lights from down the corridor would have provided enough light for something to be seen down the corridor, not this absolute darkness. I twiddled the controls to the camera anxiously. I only caught glimpses of the darkness with every sweep of the camera but it seemed to be getting closer and closer to the camera. No zoom. I leaned forward, almost pressing my nose to the screen to look at the advancing edge of the darkness. When my eyes focused on the leading edge of the shadows, I jerked back in the seat in shock. The lights weren't being turned off. The shadows were slowly advancing towards the camera like an oily tide. What I saw from a distance as a solid line resolved itself into a mass of squirming tendrils grabbing at the floor and

the walls and pulling a solid mass of black forward.

Dirty. That's how this place felt. I could hear my grandmother's dry voice intoning the word in Mandarin in my head. She held on to the superstitions of her hometown back in China, always ensuring that all her grandchildren were always carrying some Buddhist sutra somewhere or another to keep us all safe. Safe from places like this. Dirty places. Not the dirt and the dust outside. Spiritually unclean places. Those places which make your hair stand on end. Which animals avoided because they know better than us. I wanted nothing more than to leave the damn building behind. Or to have had one of grandma's charms in my pocket.

More movement on Camera #36. I finally found Tim. He was walking down one of the adjoining corridors - maybe looking for Camera #36 himself? He had a little triumphant smirk on his face when he looked up and spotted the camera, oblivious to what lurked around the corner. He disappeared as the camera continued its slow sweep, turning its unblinking eye towards the central corridor. The darkness had made it to about halfway down the corridor. The slow flow of the dark towards the camera was mesmerizing. It was all I could do to tear my gaze from the screen and punch in Tim's number with nerveless fingers.

"Come on, come on." I chanted to the receiver. The click as the call connected was one of the sweetest things I heard in my life.

"Hey, you're here!" Tim's voice boomed out of the receiver, in the same unnaturally euphoric tones. If I hadn't known any better, I would have assumed he was on drugs.

"Look, Tim, there's something strange on Camera #36. I...I don't think it's safe there." I was practically babbling at that point, the unnatural darkness on the screen touching some raw nerve deep within me.

"There is no Camera #36, I put them all in myself. You don't sound too good..."

Camera #36 showed Tim stopping in shock as he saw the inky blackness in the corridor, against all good sense, he started moving forward towards it. The camera didn't pause at the horror before it, and all I saw next was the empty corridor Tim came from.

"Look man, that shit looks dangerous. We should just get out of here. Come back tomorrow when there's more people around or something," my voice echoed in the confines of the room, bouncing off steel racks of hard disks, processors and fans.

"You don't sound so good, boy. You're looking at the cameras right? I'm coming over." That same maddening tone. It practically leered down the phone line at me.

Back to Tim. He had knelt down in front of the inky patch on the ground. He reached out to touch the darkness with one tentative hand.

"Fuck! Don't do that!" I yelled, my voice cracking. I frantically clicked at the controls with the mouse. They wouldn't work. Nothing was working. I saw Tim stiffen up and clutch at his arm as the camera moved on.

People say that things get clearer in a crisis situation. That time slows down. I didn't get any of that. The indecision froze me. I wouldn't be able to find Tim in time. My gaze swung indecisively from the door of the security room back to the screen, mirroring the dumb sweep of the camera. I had no idea where the damn camera was. I'd be better off trying to raise Tim on the mobile phone.

I returned to Camera #36. No sign of Tim. The inky darkness continued down the corridor unabated. There was something small on the floor. Tim's phone. He must have dropped it. He must have made his escape. The view down the other corridor. No sign of Tim. No chance that he could have slipped past the camera. That's not how we set them up. Back to the central corridor and

the crawling darkness again. Just in time to see Tim's mobile phone get swallowed up by the dark.

I gaped at the screen. Nothing in the room apart from the whirl of fans and the thunder of my pulse in my ears. No, something else. A small scratchy voice coming from my phone on the table. My hands were trembling as I lifted it off the table.

"I thought you'd gone. Just stay there. I'm coming. It's hungry. It's hungry. It's hungry." Tim's voice still had that crazed cheeriness around it, the tone now taking on a menacing undercurrent.

I was so intent on Camera #36 that I hadn't noticed the room darkening slightly. The other cameras were turning off. One by one. No, they weren't being turned off. They were going dark. Just like the corridor in Camera #36. Completely black. No emergency exit lights, nothing picked up on the low light mode nothing but a blank screen and the little symbol showing the cameras in recording mode. That little symbol. It hit me like a blow to the gut. Camera #36. Tim's phone on the floor while he was still screaming nonsense down the line at me. Camera #36, impossible to control from the console because the camera wasn't recording at all.

It was playing a recording.

I was stuck. Trapped in a cage. In a room filled with eyes, I was slowly going blind as each screen winked out. Terror took on a new dimension. There was no way out. Help. I needed to get help. My breaths came hard and fast as the last of the cameras winked out. I had to do something. Then I saw it. One strand of hope. The big red button. I didn't know if the connection to the alarm company was up yet. The slap of my palm on the button echoed in the tiny room like a gunshot.

I breathed out a sigh of relief. If I was right, somewhere in an office across town, an alarm would have gone off, someone in a company very much like mine would be pulling out a list of addresses and calling the police with a potential break-in at my

location. My triumph was short lived. My knees turned to water as I picked out a new sound over the whirl of the fans in the computers in a room. The small insistent sound of scratching, at the door to the room.

"Aren't you going to let me in? It's cold and dark out here. And I'm hungry."

Tim's voice was different now. Earlier on it had his usual nasal overtone. But now it seemed dry, with a strange echo to it, like a few people were speaking at once. It sounded nothing at all like Tim. I wondered if Tim's voice was what I wanted to hear from my phone all along, when all I was hearing was this dead, alien thing.

There was a tiny crack under the door. There should have been a small sliver of light, but there was only a line of black.

I backed away from door. The sound of scratching grew louder. It filled the room. It sounded less and less like fingernails and more like claws raking on the reinforced door. The screech of something hard on the metal built to a crescendo and then just... stopped. The silence that followed was even louder than the din that preceded it. Then, the slow scrap of metal on metal. Tumblers in a lock turning. Tim's keys. Tim had the goddamn keys.

The heavy door swung in. What was outside was... nothing. It was like gazing into a deep dark hole. Except the light from the room should have illuminated the corridor beyond. Instead, there was just this wall of black. Against all logic, the shadows were moving into the room. The inky darkness flowed across the threshold like a ebon tide. I knew I had to do something. The longer I waited, the less likely the chances of escape. I darted forward and grabbed the door. The black shadows had already crept up the door. I saw my hand disappear up to my forearm as I plunged it into the shadows, looking for the end of the door to close it. My questing fingers found the hard edge of the door and I started to push. The door budged but just barely. I began to lean my weight against the door, breathing harder with both fear and exertion. The feeling of the inky blackness was far from pleasant. It wasn't cold

like I expected. It was warm. The same warmth of a living body. My forearm felt the prodding and groping of a dozen squirming fingers trying to grasp my hand, their caresses getting more urgent as the door swung shut. Pain blossomed in my arm as the graspings turned to scratches and nails dug into my flesh. With a last burst of effort, I managed to shut the door. There was no trace of the shadows in the room, and only the beads of blood welling up from my forearm stood testament to the horror of the previous moments.

The minutes felt like hours while I was waiting for the cops, bracing my back against the door, hoping that whatever the hell was on the other side of the door wouldn't make another attempt to get into the room. I first noticed my ordeal was over when the screens on the console started lighting up with the normal camera feeds again. All except for one. The feed from Camera #36 was nothing but a haze of static.

I was in a daze as the cops arrived and I gave them some spiel about fixing the cameras and thinking that I saw some intruder before the feed cut out. The residual fear from my ordeal lent some measure of credibility to my story. The cops took me and the night guard on a cursory check of the premises. They seemed as eager to leave as I was, albeit for different reasons.

Tim hasn't been back to work for the past few days. The job at the building remains incomplete. They've asked me about it at least 3 times, since I'd already gone over the plans once. At first I gave excuses. Eventually, I just flat out refused. I knew full well the job wasn't done. On the last sweep of the premises with the cops, I found myself at a familiar junction between corridors. Just at the right height, a bare bunch of wires dangling from the wall. Next to it, a placeholder written on the wall in chalk. #36.